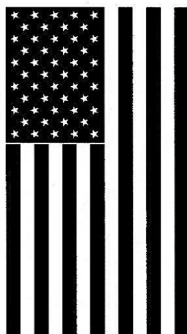


Obits



Military funeral brings back memories of service

By Gordon Graham

The other day I attended a military funeral. I have been to other military funerals in the past, as a friend or relative of the deceased, but this was the first time I have ever been a part of the ceremony.

Being part of the ceremony was certainly not my intention when I showed up at the local VFW post home. I went there, I told myself, strictly as an observer and to show my support, but it didn't end up that way.

As the time approached to depart for the cemetery it was obvious there were not enough men present to form the firing squad so I became an unwilling volunteer. It has been over 50 years since I fired an army rifle of any sort and when I did carry one during service it was a 30 caliber carbine, not one of the more formidable weapons that I was asked to handle on this occasion.

In my mind, a military funeral is somehow different than other funerals and I did not want to be the one who screwed up the procedure. Every other one of these I attended in the past went off without a flaw. Would I be able to respond accurately to the commands after such a long period of time? Would I fire the rifle out of sync and make us look bad at such a solemn occasion? Fifty-plus years is a long time ago and I was not sure I could even remember how to do the manual-of-arms.

There was a lot of encouragement on the part of the men present and after a certain amount of cajoling I agreed to take part in the three-man firing squad. Even after agreeing, I tried to get out of it by saying I did not have a proper cap to wear to the ceremony! But this attempt failed when one of the men said he had an extra cap in his car. At this point I ran out of excuses and we closed the door behind us and headed for the cemetery.

By the time we got there some of the family members had already gathered at the grave site and others arrived soon thereafter. The family had made arrangements for a bugler to play taps and a piper in full regalia.

The clergy spoke and then the military aspect of the proce-

dure was handled by members of our post. Our post chaplain did his usual masterful job and the family was handed the customary folded flag of the United States.

The time had come for the rifle squad to do their thing. We were standing at parade rest and then the command came to "attention!" The fifty-some years suddenly disappeared, heels came together and the rifle came to my side in one motion. "Port arms!" With a firm grip on the rifle barrel and without hesitation my right arm rose upward diagonally across my chest, my left hand grasped the wooden barrel support and my right hand went down to the pistol grip on the stock.

"Ready" was the next command, and I took a half step forward. "Aim" and I brought the piece to my shoulder. "Fire!" The three of us fired in unison and it sounded as one, with the empty cartridges ejecting to the side. This was repeated two more times and my rifle came to the present arms position in front of me.

The mournful sound of the bugler playing taps in the background brought a chill up my spine as I stood at rigid attention. This always happens when I hear taps, but on this particular day it seemed more acute.

"Parade rest" and I brought my rifle to my side and placed my left forearm in the middle of my back.

Then the distinctive sound of the piper playing "Amazing Grace" was heard through the sturdy oak trees as he played this most meaningful hymn he moved slowly away from the assemblage and the haunting sound became quieter and quieter, till it faded away almost completely. What a moment!

The ceremony was over and the people began to disperse, each going his own way. The members of the VFW gathered briefly with friends and I returned the borrowed cap to its owner. It was obvious to me these men felt a real comradeship toward their fellow soldier and performed this ritual not as an obligation but as an honor and I felt a part of it. I went to this funeral as an observer and came away as a participant. I'm glad I went!